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Raising the Bar and Surpassing Expectations

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight changes that were made as part of Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College's Complete College Georgia initiative, which was a broader University System of Georgia's effort that linked to Complete College America. Specifically, we focused on the creation and evolution of a retention program that originated from changes in our standards of academic progress. The changes reflected a philosophical shift from the college being a traditional associate's degree granting institution to being a baccalaureate degree granting institution. We also discuss other factors that may have attributed to the success of the early intervention program. We hope that by sharing the success of this model that other institutions may revisit their own retention programs and institutional standards in order to advance the common goal of student success.

Background

Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College (ABAC), ranked fourteenth in "top public schools" in the Southern region by *U.S. News and World Report*, is a unique college with an enrollment of approximately 3400 students in a micropolitan community in rural Southern Georgia. The hundred and five year old campus is a unit of the 31-member University System of Georgia and is situated on over five hundred acres. With its vast facilities, including a working farm, horse stables, golf course laboratory, and the Georgia Museum of Agriculture and Historic Village, the College has a long history of agriculture and natural resource programs that account for about twenty-five percent of the college's overall student population (Office of Institutional Research). A high percentage of students also major in nursing, business, liberal arts, and science.

In 2011, the Director of Student Financial Services met with Academic Affairs leadership to express concern over changing federal financial aid guidelines from the U.S. Department of Education, particularly as those guidelines related to the Financial Aid standards of progress. Students who fell below the 2.0 grade point average or who didn't meet the standards of academic progress were issued a letter of warning and notification from the Student Financial Services office. The results of a customer service survey highlighted problematic issues in the Student Financial Services office. In addition, the director felt that raising the academic standards of progress (used for academic warning, probation, suspension) to match the new financial aid standards of progress might assist in addressing some of the confusion students and parents experienced when confronted with different standards.

The Academic Affairs leadership reviewed the Standards of Academic Progress, produced scenarios that would more closely align the Academic and Financial Aid standards, and asked the Enterprise Data Services office to produce reports that would reflect the impact of making changes.

The Academic Standards of Progress for Probation at the time were (*ABAC Catalog*):

<u>Total Hours Attempted</u>	<u>Minimum Cumulative GPA</u>
0-12	1.5
13-24	1.6
25-36	1.7
37-48	1.8
49-60	1.9
60+	2.0

Traditionally, the office of Academic Affairs notified students who were placed on academic probation, and these students were limited to taking 14 credit hours of course work for the following semester. Having less than 15 hours each semester is a progression issue if a student is to graduate on time, and the college is addressing this issue through advising from advisors in the Academic Support Office. Dictating that students on probation take 14 credit hours was actually irrelevant because the majority of these students did not take over 12 credit hours. In addition to the 14 hour rule, students on probation were encouraged to get tutoring, assistance from their instructors, etc. Historically, there had been no tracking of or follow-up with students on probation to ensure they received assistance in any way.

The Academic Standards of Progress for Suspension (*ABAC Catalog*) at the time were:

<u>Total Hours Attempted</u>	<u>Minimum Cumulative GPA</u>
0-24	no minimum
25-36	1.5
37-48	1.6
49-60	1.7
60+	1.8

A student's first suspension was for one semester while subsequent suspensions were for one calendar year. In essence, these standards of academic progress for probation and suspension meant that a student could actually be on campus with a zero GPA for a full year, if not longer, while on probation—a situation that our leadership found to be appalling from both an ethical and an accountability perspective.

While ABAC's leadership was investigating impact of the standards of progress, the University System of Georgia unveiled the Complete College Georgia (CCG) initiative, part of the larger Complete College America movement, which required institutions to set completion goals, develop action plans, and report outcomes or measures of progress. More specifically, increasing access, increasing progression and retention, and increasing graduation were components that the university system colleges and universities were striving for in their action plans. ABAC had one of the highest retention rates among the state colleges in Georgia (above 55%) and a graduation rate approximately 5% above the 8% state college average.

As part of the College's CCG plan, the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Director of Academic Support worked through the development of an early intervention system for students placed on probation at the end of their first semester, and college leadership adopted new academic standards of progress that were recommended from the academic administrators

and faculty. The new academic standards of progress were 2.0 GPA across the board. If a student did not achieve a 2.0 in his/her first semester, then he/she was placed on academic probation. If the student did not achieve a term GPA of 2.0 in his/her second semester, then he/she would be placed on suspension; however, if the student achieved a 2.0 term GPA in the second semester (even if the overall GPA fell below 2.0), then the student remained on continued academic probation and would continue as such until the overall GPA became 2.0. While part of the development of the early intervention system was to “save” students before they were suspended, part of the motivation was also to not adversely impact overall enrollment by suspending more students. These new standards allowed for an innovative early intervention system, and subsequently a higher academic standard, while still allowing a gradual penalty for weak academic performance and maintaining enrollment, a major concern for the college given the lack of growth in a down-turned economy.

Toward the New Model

To get a better understanding of what other higher educational institutions across the nation were implementing for an early intervention system, an academic intervention program review was completed by the Academic Support team, where models from Iowa State University, George Mason University, Macomb Community College, and Rockland Community College were selected for study due to their success, the variety of institutional type, and for their geographical locations. Common components for these programs include early identification of poor performance (usually after the first semester), mandated participation requirement, meeting with academic advisors, and a meeting with a success counselor or required tutoring. These components served as a framework to help guide the academic intervention program at ABAC.

The Academic Support team developed the intervention program based on the following criteria:

- Involvement in the intervention program from the students placed into the newly developed retention class for first time freshmen on probation, ABAC 1100
- Required group meetings with the Academic Support Counselors that focused on the seriousness of academic probation and suspension
- A minimum of two required meetings with an Academic Support Counselor before midterm
- An online interactive component, through the Desire 2 Learn (D2L) learning management system, that students could complete on their own time, which introduced them to campus services, time management, and study skills
- A mandated requirement to register and attend the class component that would not hinder the students’ academic progression or interfere with other academic classes

Using the above criteria and the framework from the other institutions, a hybrid intervention course, ABAC 1100, was drafted. The curriculum for this course was approved by the College’s standing curriculum committee. The course was presented to the Cabinet for approval because of the mandated one credit hour these students on probation would be required to take. Adding a mandated one hour course for students, even though the intention was to assist students in becoming more successful, had economic implications because of the added tuition costs for students and their families and had an indirect institutional cost in time for the Academic Support unit.

Providing students with the appropriate academic resources and support to return them to “Good Academic Standing” was the objective developed for ABAC 1100. According to research by Ishitani and DesJardings (2002), who conducted a longitudinal study on college dropouts, the higher a student’s GPA is his first year of college, the more likely he is to make progress toward graduation. The results of Ishitani and DesJardings’ study suggest that the earlier a college can provide academic assistance to low performers, the more likely they are to succeed and matriculate through college. The course was designed to be conducted during the first eight-week short session of the semester to provide the necessary resources for early academic achievement. Students placed in the class would meet for one hour a week during a time no other classes were scheduled on campus for the first three weeks of the semester.

Beginning the Course

The first class meeting conducted by the Academic Support Counselors introduced the resources offered by the Academic Support department and required the students to sign up for their first individual meeting with their assigned Academic Support Counselor. Additionally, the Vice President for Academic Affairs and the Director of Financial Aid met with the students, during a separate class hour to discuss poor academic performance and the long term effects on their academic aspirations and resulting restrictions and/or loss of financial aid. ABAC’s online learning management system (Desire2Learn) was used as a supplement to the in class time to cover topics such as: a) Study Skills, b) Time Management, c) Campus Resources and d) Putting it all together. More specifically, instructors communicate how to effectively use all the resources with one’s classes. Further, instructors provide the supplemental online class experience by allowing the students to complete the lessons at their pace, with a deadline of midterm, to prevent conflicts with other and more rigorous academic class requirements.

Two required face-to-face meetings with an Academic Support Counselor were designed as the main component to help each student develop an individual success plan. The first meeting was required within the first two weeks of class, and the students completed and returned their academic self-assessment, which was an assignment that allowed students to check their grades in Banner and discuss how they came to earn the grades they did. During this time, a tutoring schedule and referrals to other campus resources were made. Possible referrals included Student Development for professional counseling and career services, Dean of Students Office for conflict resolution in student housing, and the Tutor Center Coordinator for individual tutoring sessions. Students were encouraged to drop in and visit the Academic Support office as often as they liked between the first and second meeting.

The second required meeting was scheduled a week before the course withdrawal deadline. Before this meeting, the Academic Support Counselors contacted the students’ instructors and received a full progress report that focused on attendance, assignment completion, test grades, and, if the instructor deemed, whether the student could be successful or should withdraw from the class. This information was reviewed with the student, and in the majority of cases, a success plan for the remainder of the semester was developed.

Previous efforts were passive in nature and simply encouraged students to seek help from their instructors or the tutoring center, as noted in the probation letters. This new model is actively engaging the students, instructors, and academic counselors, thus allowing each student to have support both in and out of the classroom. Students enrolled in the program are actively encouraged to visit Academic Support office as often as they needed, beyond just the required

two meetings. Emails, text messages, Facebook messages, and phone call reminders were sent as a means to reach out to the students between and after the required meetings.

The grading scale for the class is satisfactory/unsatisfactory, which will not impact the student's GPA; however a grade of "U" (unsatisfactory) does negatively impact financial aid as an unsuccessful attempt. A student would be deemed successful by meeting these minimum requirements:

- Attend 2 of the 3 in class meetings
- Attend the two required individual meeting with assigned Academic Support Counselor
- Complete at least 70% of the online assignments

Results of the Course Implementation

In reviewing student data before course implementation from 2011 and 2012, we noted that **25% of students progressed to their second year**. With the retention model in place, the 2013 showed that once **52% of the first cohort of students progressed to the second year**. The results were stunning, and we could not have been more pleased.

While the parameters of the initial test group were first time freshmen who were placed on academic probation for the first time, the actual number of students who met these criteria for the 2012 Fall Semester and received notification from the Academic Affairs office was 200. From this group, 141 returned for the 2013 Spring Semester and were enrolled in the one hour Academic Success Seminar, ABAC 1100. The 59 students who did not return to ABAC were polled, and of the 13 that responded, the top reasons for not returning to the College for the spring 2013 semester were:

- Parent(s) made student attend a school close to home
- Transferred to another institution

At the end of spring 2013 semester, 52% (73) of the 141 students on probation progressed and were not suspended, while 48% (68) were placed on Academic Suspension as shown on Table 1.

The initial results of the first time freshmen, who were placed on academic probation and then enrolled in the ABAC 1100 academic intervention class, are nearly twice as likely to progress to their second year compared to those students from the previous two academic years. The first semester GPAs of the 141 students at the end of fall 2012 ranged as follows:

- $8 = 0.0$
- $0 < 15 < 0.5$
- $0.5 \leq 29 < 1.0$
- $1.0 \leq 89 < 2.0$

Looking at the subset of 89 students who earned a GPA greater than or equal to 1.0 their first term, and the subset of 52 students who earned a GPA less than 1.0 their first term illustrates success. Of the 89 students who were enrolled in ABAC 1100, only 15 were placed on academic suspension. The remaining 74 achieved a term GPA of 2.0 or higher and progressed to the

second year. Consequently, all 52 students in the second subset did not obtain a second semester GPA of 2.0 or higher and thus were placed on Academic Suspension as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Because of the implementation of ABAC 1100, the total number of students being suspended has decreased over time, the number of students continuing to progress has increased over time, and the total number of students who have returned to good academic standing has increased over time.

Discussion

GPA analysis of students in ABAC 1100 is shown in Table 2. Analysis of the results shows that students whose GPA falls between 1.0 and 2.0 are more successful than those whose GPA falls below a 1.0. The ABAC 1100 course will need to be modified in order to better serve those freshmen who earn less than a 1.0 their first term, since they were less successful. One possible solution could be to divide the students into two different sections of ABAC 1100 using a GPA of 1.0 as the criteria in order to more offer more intensive intervention. Nonetheless, the implementation of the academic intervention program, ABAC 1100, is a step in a positive direction to assist students with progress toward a degree.

A student's college choice is an important decision for students and their families, and has great financial implications, so college and university personnel should do all that they can to make the right choice at the beginning of their college journey and help them succeed. Our survey shows that when students "stop-out" or "drop-out" after not performing well, they often transfer or select a school closer to home. It is unclear how students can transfer to another institution if they were academically suspended. However, what is important is that colleges find unique and innovative ways to assist students who choose to stay and work towards academic progress and graduation. The business as usual of maintaining low academic standards must be addressed due to changing financial aid policies and the need for accountability, and in doing so, successful models can not only increase retention, but enable institutions to maintain a balanced enrollment.

Table 2: This table shows the increase of student GPAs after taking ABAC 1100.

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